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Who is it?  
Wesley Mimico United Church  
December 14, 2014  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Isaiah 61:1-11 and John 1:6-28

“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; and has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour” How easily those words just roll off the tongue during Advent. Familiar words, comforting words. Words that let us know that Advent is here and Christmas is coming. Usually, we read these texts and imagine they are all about good things - proclaiming good news. Proclaiming liberty. Proclaiming healing. Proclaiming the coming of God’s reign. It’s all so nice and cozy. We can almost hear Isaiah break into a chorus of “it’s the most wonderful time of the year”. Why wait? Bring out the Christmas cookies now!

But these are also challenging words. Particularly when we compare the words to what we find in our own communities, or even more unsettling, to what we find in our own hearts. “Binding up the brokenhearted” sounds OK, you know, within reason and if people can prove to us that they really deserve our help and agree to adapt their lifestyles to become more like us, and definitely give up smoking before we give them any free food of course. Of course we want to help others. But what about this “bringing ... release to the prisoners”? We worked hard to round up those criminals in the first place. We put a lot of tax dollars into tracking, collecting, holding, trying, incarcerating, and reintegrating criminals. Why on earth would we want to simply release them? If Isaiah had lived in Mimico, near our super-jail, I’m pretty sure he would have changed his tune. And I’m even more sure that if John visited with some of the inmates I’ve met at the Toronto West Detention Centre, he would be far less keen to release them into “civilized” society. Perhaps by “releasing the prisoners” Isaiah meant helping inmates cope with the

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psychological aspects of incarceration and learning to live with themselves. Well maybe Isaiah missed the memo, but we put people in prison to make them suffer. That's an important part of the "therapy". In either case, why would we want to release them? What are Isaiah and John thinking?

Sometimes, I find that Advent readings can come out of our mouths just as smoothly as mince pies can go into our mouths. And we have to do a bit of a double-take to realize just how radical these message are. These readings are not about preserving what we like to pretend is the status quo. Jesus does not come at Christmas like Santa Claus, just waiting to indulge our latest whims. Jesus comes offering transformation that is so radical that it's easy to completely miss it. Isaiah's vision demands a radical reconfiguration of our society and our selves. Big changes are needed. Perhaps like eliminating the whole concept of individual wealth, or replacing "tolerance" for others with a deeply felt rejection of all forms of prejudice, or pushing all our governments to stop using "enhanced interrogation" - torture - in it's daily operations. Or perhaps ... see, it's hard to even imagine big enough to engage with Isaiah's vision. Much easier to simply let these familiar words waft over us, and go to the mall after this service and stock up on *real* things we can touch and buy that we *need* for Christmas.

If we read these texts only as "good" news - I believe we miss a deeper meaning. Isaiah and John did not simply say "the reign of God is coming" and leave it at that. They were speaking of their own experiences, and their own hopes.

John was a rebel and a revolutionary. Remember - although the Bible doesn't give us many details on this point - John was arrested and executed. Whatever else that means, it means that he threatened the status quo. And of course - even today - attempting to buck the status quo and redefine tradition is a dangerous act.

John took an existing tradition, ritual washing, and redefined it in a new way that gave his baptism a particular and a special significance. John put his baptism with water in line with what he calls a coming baptism of the spirit. This is something new. John redefined a cleansing ritual that involved water into a transformative action that used water as a symbol of God's spirit. John was questioned by the religious authorities of his

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day as to who he was precisely because he was taking an old symbolic action and giving it new meaning, and the religious leaders questioned John about his authority to do that.

Redefining traditions. What an idea. We'd never do that here in laid-back Canada, would we? Of course, we do it all the time. At the University of Guelph, for example, Halloween has been redefined. I quote from their student life web site,

“Many students look back fondly on their days of trick-or-treating. Creative costumes, scary decorations, jack-o-lanterns, and of course brimming bags of candy dominated the end of October. For most university students, the joys of Halloween have been pushed into the background. Comments like “aren’t you too old to be trick-or-treating”, peers who are “too cool” for costumes, as well as a sense of maturity all lead to a decline in Halloween fun. ... [W]e have the perfect solution!

Every Halloween, the University of Guelph Chapter Meal Exchange hosts the Trick-or-Eat Campaign. Over 1500 students participate, going door to door [in costume] collecting non-perishable food items to donate to the Guelph Food Bank. Trick-or-Eat is an undeniably good cause, it’s also a lot of fun.”<sup>1</sup>

*[ask: how have Christmas traditions changed during your lifetime?]*

During my lifetime – and yours – Christmas has moved from being a religious event to being a predominantly secular one. We have maintained many of the rituals and trappings of course. But I see many parallels between our own experiences of Christmas in 2014 and the dilemma that John faced.

In John's day, Jewish cleansing activities had become ritual activities, practiced for their own sakes, and had lost their transformational power. And in our day, the celebration of the coming of Jesus has been reduced substantially to a ritualistic activity, practiced simply because we follow the calendar and listen to marketers. The event has lost much of it's earlier transformative power for many people.

John invites us to take our existing rituals, and to radically change them in order

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<sup>1</sup> <http://studentlife.uoguelph.ca/parents/halloween-fun-guelph>

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to rediscover meaningful transformational power. Perhaps we need to re-imagine Christmas. In the words of Teri Peterson, “Could it be that the way to know the joyful fruit of the Spirit is to practice? Not to gaze heavenward, anticipating something better; not to turn away from suffering because it's depressing and ugly; but instead to get more grounded, reach to our roots, push down into the earth and let God grow in us like a seed ... to live fully into our calling as anointed ones, the body of Christ, made to bring grace to a world in need, to shine light into a world of darkness.”

Jesus was more terse. You are you light of the world. You. *You!*

According to Liz Crumlish, “Gone are the familiar things we cherished, the old ways and traditions, packed churches and faith ... embraced. How is it possible to follow Jesus, to proclaim good news in this changed landscape? How about looking for God in unexpected places? Hearing the good news from unexpected people? Being prepared to undergo change so that God can transform us? Waking up to the fact that God lives at the margins of life? ... Advent [is] the kind of preparation that belongs not in our church buildings, but out at the margins of our society. And, in this changed landscape, a reality that invites us to discover anew that the life-changing word of God is still good news.”

When you leave this service and head to the mall, go with joy and enjoy the truly fun ritual of buying things for family and friends. Delight in preparing elaborate celebrations for Christmas. Those things *are* meaningful. Those things are good. But look for a deeper gift too. Look for the gift of transformation and new life in your own self. Because the gifts of Christmas are already present - in each one of us. In you. You - me - the hands and feet of Jesus - might just be the only gifts that the world actually needs.

*Amen.*